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Bosnia and Herzegovina

All power to the plenums?

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One of the most positive developments in the Bosnian protests has been the birth of direct democratic assemblies – but some major challenges remain.

It's been two weeks since the start of the Bosnian rebellion. [1] A recent poll has shown that 88% of the people in the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina support the protests. These protests are still going on, but they are peaceful now and hence the media attention is no longer as great, even though the protests remain a much discussed topic in the region. However, perhaps the main locus of the protest movement has now switched to the direct democratic plenums (general assemblies) emerging all around Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The plenums

General assemblies in their various forms are a very old means of direct democratic organization of the oppressed during times of protests, rebellions, strikes and revolutions (like the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia, 1936 in Catalonia or 1956 in Hungary). The earliest versions of some kind of general assemblies were already present in ancient Athens, while many –theorists of utopia' imagine some kind of general assemblies in their blueprints of potential democratic societies in the future.

The sudden emergence of the plenums in large parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken everybody by complete surprise. One could even say that the plenums themselves are the greatest positive development in the protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina so far. The first plenum appeared in Tuzla, the center and starting point of the protests, where the protesters were most articulated and most organized from the start. After that, plenums started to appear in other cities as well, taking Tuzla as their example.

The following cities now have their own plenums: Sarajevo (the capital), Tuzla, Zenica, Mostar, Travnik, Brčko, Goražde, Konjic, Cazin, Donji Vakuf, Fojnica, Orašje and Bugojno. Right now, regular sessions are taking place where people discuss political problems and make demands on the government (the most common being the revision of privatization issues, various social demands, taking away the privileges of the political class, and so on). There are also efforts ongoing to try to coordinate all the already existing plenums on the state level in order to develop universal and not just local demands. The first joint plenum is also planned in Sarajevo, with the arrival of the delegates of local plenums.

This is not the first time that the word plenum is used in the region with this concrete meaning, referring to a direct democratic –general assembly'. The first time the word was used in reference to general assemblies was during a great wave of university occupations in Croatia back in 2009. The same term later appears during the 2010 university occupations in Austria and Germany (though it's not clear if this has some kind of direct link to the Croatian student movement or if it's just a very strange coincidence), and in 2011 during the university occupations in Slovenia and Serbia (where there was a direct influence of the Croatian student movement).

The protesters who are organizing the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina openly acknowledge that they are using the experiences of the Croatian student movement and their how-to-make-a-general-assembly manual called The Occupation Cookbook. Of course, all these plenums are very similar to the general assemblies the world witnessed in 2011 during Occupy Wall Street and elsewhere, so one can also indirectly relate them to the –Occupy tradition' of the last couple of years. In any case, it is quite clear that one can find common patterns of horizontal organization

around the world, which have very old roots, but have also been reinvigorated in recent times.

What is to be done?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the plenums have certainly shown to be a highly useful method in organizing the protesters and articulating their demands. In the last couple of days, there are signs of evolution in the plenums, with their structure becoming more complex. Thus, just like in the Croatian student movement or during Occupy Wall Street, the plenum in Tuzla has organized working groups that are to deal with special issues, mimicking the ministries of the Tuzla canton: education, science, culture and sports; development and entrepreneurship; spatial planning and environment protection; coordination with workers, administration of justice and governance, industry, energy and mining; interior affairs; health care; agriculture, water management and forestry; commerce, tourism, transportation and communications; work and social policy; finances; war veterans' problems; legal problems.

But the plenums are not without their faults. First of all, they are indeed a useful way to organize protesters, but they are not really representative of the general population. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are reportedly plenums with more than 1.000 people in attendance and in many case there are also live online feeds. However, 1.000 people at the Sarajevo plenum cannot really be representative of the whole city, which has more than 300.000 inhabitants. Not to mention the fact that the plenums are usually taken to represent not only one city but whole cantons, while for people living outside of the canton centers, getting to the plenums can be costly in terms of both time and money.

Of course, even if everybody could come it would be impossible to have a general assembly with tens of thousands of people. While bearing in mind that bourgeois representative democracy also has many flaws of its own and that it remains at best a very limited kind of democracy, still one should strive at making direct democracy as expansive and participatory as it can be. The unified plenums on the level of a city or canton are a great and completely legitimate way to start organizing during the protests, but they can hardly be a final solution. Even now there are plenums in smaller cities (like Cazin, Fojnica or Donji Vakuf), which are not cantonal centers and are concerned with more local issues (and not with canton-wide politics in general), but there seems to be no strict coordination between lower and upper level plenums (which is not necessarily a surprise in this early stage of plenum development).

There are a number of problems at stake here. One is whether the plenums can maintain their numbers after the protests subside (which has to occur at one point or another) and after their aura of novelty has gone. This appeared to be a great problem in the Croatian student movement, where the plenums have in time "diminished and slowly ceased to function, in one case only after a couple of years, but still (though it must be noted that, at least at some universities, the plenums still exist in a way, as they can always be assembled when deemed necessary). The future of the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina will partly depend on their successes. Some victories have already been achieved: in Tuzla the politicians, responding to the demand of the Tuzla plenum, have already given up some of their privileges (a yearly wage after they go off duty).

Still, it is generally difficult to expect a mass presence at the plenums forever. People have their own personal interests and, indeed, they have to work for a living (if they are lucky enough to work, since the unemployment rate stands at about 45% in Bosnia and Herzegovina). You cannot really expect someone working 8 hours (or more) per day to spend a couple of hours at a general assembly afterwards (if we want to achieve some kind of direct democracy we should obviously be striving towards a reduced working day). Also, it is hardly realistic to expect that everybody will want to decide on everything all the time.

That said, however, the idea of direct democracy is not that everybody has to decide on everything all the time. The point is that direct democracy should provide everybody with the possibility and the means of deciding directly on

certain issues (if that is what they want to do). Thus, in theory we can indeed vote directly on everything, but in practice we'll do it only when we want to and when there's a very important decision to be made.

In bourgeois representative democracy, that is usually not possible (exceptions like Switzerland, with its many referenda, are rare), because almost all the decisions (except for a referendum here and there) are taken by the chosen representatives, who can do basically whatever they want during their elected term. In a direct democratic system, the difference would reside in the fact that the chosen representatives would not so much make their own decisions (except in the case of small, technical, everyday affairs), but would rather act upon the general decisions agreed upon by the assembly, which they would just carry out.

These "representatives" would be more like some kind of administrators who would be recallable at any time (again, through general assemblies, referenda, or other direct democratic means) if people do not approve of their work. How many decisions would in practice be left to the "administrative autopilot" (if we're pleased with it) and how many decisions would be taken directly by everyone "at local, city, region or country level" would be a matter of choice, concrete circumstances and political needs.

Should the plenums be institutionalized?

It is clear where the political legitimacy of general assemblies (plenums) comes from. It is simply the case of people joining together, in completely open assemblies where everyone can talk and vote under the same conditions to decide on their livelihoods. Thus, the plenums do not ask their legitimacy from anyone "they take it. At the present moment, the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina have no official legal power, but their influence stems mainly from the government's fear that a complete disregard of the demands of the plenums would perhaps again lead to the type of violent protests that left government buildings burning all over the country.

However, the big question is whether the plenums can overcome what they are now "organizational bodies of protest" and become permanent bodies of political decision-making. Can the plenums go on even after the protests stop? An additional problem is whether their potential future functioning will be informal (as it is now), as a kind of parallel unofficial political body trying to articulate the interests of the 99%, or whether they are to become some kind of officially legalized political bodies (which seems far-fetched at the present moment). Many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are enthusiastic about the plenums and are taking part in them on a daily basis. However, there seem to be no demands for the plenums to be officially recognized by law and given real powers (not to mention the absence of calls for the possibility of organizing plenums in the working places).

Although it is quite possible to make an immediate demand for direct democracy in general (without providing details on how this would function), it would be good if the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina were to evolve more towards the local level (below the level of the present city/canton-wide plenums) and toward the state level (above the level of the present city/canton-wide plenums). There is no need in rushing things prematurely while the plenums are still a political novelty, but one should perhaps already start thinking about trying to organize local plenums (on the level of local communities, municipalities, districts, and so on), coordinating them to city and cantonal levels and thus replacing the currently existing (and less representative) unified city/cantonal plenums.

Of course, the problem could lie in the feasibility of these smaller plenums "it's very possible that there wouldn't be enough interest for participation in smaller, local plenums, so one should probably hold on with trying to organize these until real need for them organically appears from below. The next step would then be to try to coordinate or even federate the plenums on the level of the whole country, if possible. As already mentioned, there are currently some efforts going on in Bosnia and Herzegovina to try to coordinate all the already existing city/canton unified

plenums, which is definitely a great start.

It's quite clear that something like this can hardly be done overnight and that it would in any case be quite complicated. The "plenum democracy" from the local to top level would definitely be rather complex, just as the existing representative system is also very complex. The system could be made to work in a number of different ways and in combination with other types of direct democracy, like referenda on various levels – from local municipalities to the whole country. It is also rather clear that we should expect a lot of experiments in trying to figure out the most effective manner for this kind of decision-making process to work.

However, if we want the plenums in Bosnia and Herzegovina to survive, such experimentation seems to be a necessity. A way to start could, for instance, be to try to organize as many local plenums as possible, to try to arrange local discussions on a number of important topics and then to try to get to a common conclusion and/or demands on the level of the whole country. This kind of system would inevitably be far from perfect, at least in the beginning, but it would nonetheless be far more democratic than any kind of decision-making processes existing now in the frames of bourgeois representative democracy (or capitalist parliamentarism, as Alain Badiou calls it).

In any case, we can only hope that some kind of demand for the institutionalization of the plenums (or direct democracy in general) will be included in the future demands of the movement. Of course, one should refrain from being too naïve or optimistic, but this goes for unnecessary pessimism as well. For instance, one of the outspoken protesters from Tuzla has said in an interview that he does not believe that the plenums can function on the level of the whole country, but that it may be possible that in the future there will be a technology that will "enable us to equally take place in the decision-making process even on state level". However, this technology already exists: it's called the internet and it has already proven very important in organizing the protest and plenums thus far.

While it's clear that the internet cannot give us an opportunity for the whole country to be part of one giant general assembly (that would be ludicrous in any case), it can help a lot in coordinating separate plenums on lower levels. With the technology we have now, there is no need to send the decisions of local plenums through mail or delegates, as was the case in Russia in 1917 or Catalonia in 1936. The internet can also help us in referendum decision-making. If there are already cases of e-voting in the frame of representative bourgeois democracy, and if we can today transfer bank funds from one account to another quite safely via the internet, why would it be impossible to vote on e-referenda and coordinate democratically the demands and decisions of different general assemblies through the internet? Needless to say, we should avoid unnecessary technological fetishism, but it's ridiculous to act like we're still in 1871. If anti-systemic forces are to win, they have to be more modern than the powers that be.

The technology is already here, the problem is mostly in using it in order to make our societies more democratic. Of course, one of the biggest problems would be how to deal with those who are profiting from the present situation, namely the political and capitalist oligarchy. Direct democracy would certainly go directly against their own particular material interests, and there's no doubt that their resistance to it would be great (as is already the case).

Direct democracy and capitalism

It is also clear that direct democracy by itself is not a means to an end. A struggle for a more democratic society is necessarily connected with a fight for social justice and equality, i.e., with a struggle against capitalism. Just having a kind of direct democratic system, but with the wealth, resources and the media still in the hands of the capitalist class and their liberal hegemony still intact, would not change much and is in any case not really possible. Just as the "democracy" we have now is perverted and subverted to the needs of the maintenance of the status quo, direct democracy could be subverted as well. We can see a glimpse of this in the cases of Switzerland or California, which

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have rather frequent referenda, but where the interests of capital are still firmly protected through their ownership of the mainstream media, their resources for making public campaigns, and so on. Hence the ‘unexpected’ and unprogressive referendum votes where California decided to vote no on GMO labelling in 2012 (which was helped by the \$45 million spent by Monsanto on the no-campaign) or vote against wages limits in Switzerland in 2013 (also helped by a ferocious public campaign of the 1%).

Capitalism, which is by definition legalized corruption, is incompatible with real democracy. The maintenance of a non-capitalist society, as the experience of really-existing socialism in the 20th century clearly shows, is also impossible without some kind of (direct) democracy to prevent the concentration of power – just as it is impossible to have a non-capitalist society in one country only. Thus, a fight for direct democracy is necessarily connected with anti-capitalism, and general assemblies should not be demanded just for municipalities, cities and countries but for firms, factories and companies as well.

Of course, the problem in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that the rebellion there is hardly openly anti-capitalist. There are indeed a lot of unconscious and ‘organic’ anti-capitalist sentiments there (for instance when discussing the problem of privatizations), but it is still a far cry from being an open and conscious anti-capitalist movement. Still, that does not mean that fighting for direct democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a waste of time, since direct democratic practices are in essence also part of a wider anti-capitalist struggle.

Needless to say, it is impossible to predict the future. Only two weeks ago it would have been impossible to imagine that general assemblies would be popping up all over Bosnia and Herzegovina. Right now, it is completely unrealistic to expect any kind of fast development of a stable political infrastructure based on general assemblies; some kind of (at least informal) plenum democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But there is no need to rush things. A deepening of the democratic process can evolve in the midst of the struggle for social and economic justice, just as the insistence on the development of the plenums does not mean that other forms of organization (such as militant unions, various formal or informal anti-systemic initiatives or even anti-capitalist political parties) are to be disregarded.

In any case, even if it were all to stop right now in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a lot has already been achieved. One has to remember that major political and societal change cannot happen in one day and that real progressive transformations are always arduous and troublesome, with lots of missteps, stumbling and failures. A revolution cannot occur in one day; it is first and foremost a long process. This is something that a lot of protesters in Bosnia and Herzegovina still have to realize. In any case, the international Left should have its eyes on Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are major things going on over there. Things not only important for the citizens of that country and its region, but also for the world – as an inspiration and a good lesson on how we can and should struggle for a better world.

[1] [Bosnia on fire: a rebellion on Europe's periphery.](#)